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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001535

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SUBJECT: Managing Uzbek Redlines in Bilateral Consultations

REF: TASHKENT 1533; ABC AGENDA WITH GOU CHANGES EMAILED TO SCA/CEN

CLASSIFIED BY: Nicholas Berliner, Pol-Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: Prior to the arrival in Tashkent of Assistant Secretary Blake, Foreign Minister Norov summoned the Ambassador for a meeting in which he reviewed the agenda for the visit and delivered the GOU's response to the U.S. draft agenda for the Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABC) (REF. B). Although the GOU's draft ABC agenda reflects most of the U.S. draft, Norov suggested that A/S Blake should not raise the issues of child labor, religious freedom or the status of NGOs in Uzbekistan with President Karimov. The GOU proposals for the ABC agenda also strike any direct reference to these issues. However, not including these issues on the ABC agenda seems to be more of a reflection of presidential neuralgia than an outright denial that these problems exist. During discussions with A/S Blake, both Norov and National Security Council Secretary Ataev spoke at length on these issues and said that the GOU was addressing known shortcomings. The key here is to work these issues into the agenda without making specific references to them, which we believe is achievable and will serve U.S. interests. Our goal should be to have discussions with the GOU that are focused more on finding solutions and less on whether or not we specifically enumerate sensitive issues such as these in the agenda. End Summary.

Red Lines on ABC Agenda

12. (C) In a meeting on October 10, Foreign Minister Norov told the Ambassador that the Uzbek side had agreed to most of the U.S. proposals for the ABC agenda and was strongly supportive of the process. He said that the GOU wants this initiative to succeed, despite what he noted was a track record of past efforts that had withered on the vine during the two previous U.S. Administrations. The draft agenda that Norov shared with the Ambassador during the meeting tracks largely with the U.S. draft and adds several agenda items close to the Uzbek's hearts, such as "military-technical cooperation", the Navoi Free Trade Zone, and others. What the GOU does not want on the agenda is child labor, religious freedom or the status of NGOs in Uzbekistan, which Norov said are not items of "mutual concern" which should be the defining characteristic of the ABC.

13. (C) Norov also cautioned the Ambassador that A/S Blake not raise these issues with President Karimov, saying, "If Blake raises these issues, he will get a sharp response. You know his character. It won't help you to raise these issues." Norov said that Uzbekistan is dealing with these issues in its own way and attributed criticism to "ideological baggage of the previous Administration." He said the GOU welcomes President Obama's approach of not seeking to "impose democracy" and suggested that the ABC process and

U.S.-Uzbek relations in general, should reflect this principle.

14. (C) As is often the case in Uzbekistan, sensitivities about saving face and avoiding criticism can lead Karimov and the GOU to dig in their heels, which appears to be the case here. Clearly Karimov's own neuralgia about having any outsider "grade" Uzbekistan on issues like child labor means that any document mentioning this will not get cleared by the Presidential Aparat. The same is true of religious freedom and NGOs. At the same time, however, GOU officials and even Karimov himself (REF A) recognize that Uzbekistan has a long road to travel to develop democracy and build civil society. As much as officials bristle at any formal mention of issues like this, they nevertheless refer to them and say that their government is working on improving the situation. Both Norov and NSC Secretary Ataev told A/S Blake on Oct. 12 that they recognize problems in the area of child labor and, although they maintained that the issue has been overblown by Western NGOs, they and other Uzbek officials openly say that their government does not want to have children working in the cotton fields and that they are taking steps to reform the cotton sector and eliminate this practice.

The Way Forward

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15. (C) Although disappointing that the GOU will not agree to put child labor, religious freedom and the status of NGOs on the agenda of the ABC, it does not come as a surprise and should by no means be interpreted to mean that we cannot address these issues within the ABC. These issues are seen by Karimov as political levers that are used to embarrass him personally and draw unfavorable comparisons between Uzbekistan and its neighbors, where many of the same problems exist. What we need to do, rather than pushing back on the GOU to include these issues explicitly on the agenda of the ABC, which will only bring us to a stalemate and potentially undo much of the progress that has been made in rebuilding trust with Karimov, is to include these issues implicitly. This will be, in fact, the best way to actually make progress on these issues, whereas insisting on listing them explicitly would be directly counter-productive. The Uzbeks acknowledge that these issues are important to Congress and to many in the U.S. public and will be willing to work with us as long as they perceive this work to be constructive and aimed at improving conditions in their country rather than singling them out for criticism.

16. (C) The problem of child labor, for example, is fundamentally an economic one driven by the structure of the Uzbek agriculture sector. Agricultural modernization is an area the GOU has agreed to work on that would allow us to address the child labor issue while we actually address the root causes of the problem as well. Likewise, we have language in the ABC relating to assistance on judicial procedures and on improving exchanges that provides latitude to discuss religious freedom and the status of NGOs.

17. (C) We need to be prepared to move incrementally with the Uzbeks. NSC Secretary Ataev told A/S Blake that he realized that Uzbekistan had a bad image in the U.S. and that it will take time to address problems that have contributed to this. In short, the Uzbeks know what their problems are, even if pride, culture and their seventy-one-year-old President make it difficult to acknowledge these openly. We should try to add more ambiguous and open language to the ABC agenda, but be prepared to move forward with less than our full complement of issues explicitly spelled out, with the knowledge that we will be able to discuss them and with a view to making concrete proposals to improve conditions in this society.

